

Blueprints and Org Charts

a sermon

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I Corinthian 3:10–11, 16–23

Most any building,

whether it be your house,
or the place where you work,
or your grocery store,
or this church,

was built according to a plan designed by an architect, or even a team of architects. That plan was represented in a set of architectural drawings, showing dimensions and materials and many other details that guided the builders in their work. For a good number of years, from say the late 1800s and on into the 1940s, these architects' drawings were produced using a contact print process on heavy paper with a blue background. And so they came to be called "blueprints."

In one of those funny and frequent quirks of language, we continued to call them "blueprints" long after they, for the most part, stopped being printed on blue paper (kind of how many of us still call the button on the remote that makes the movie go backward "the rewind button," even though it surely isn't actually rewinding a spool of videotape). Sure, a good number of people call them "architectural drawings," or "building plans," or "prints." But many just call them "blueprints." Same difference. Even if they're not blue. Which, most likely, they're not.

I recently ran across the "blueprints" for the First Reformed Church building, and they weren't on blue paper, but on an off-white that has become somewhat yellowed over the years. The person who showed them to me called them "blueprints," and I was never in doubt as to what he meant, nor was Sharon Hann when I told her, "hey, you might find these blueprints interesting."

Anyway, in these days when blueprints have long ceased to be blue, a blueprint has taken on a broader meaning than just that of an architectural drawing. Just yesterday, in fact, I noticed the title of a new article online (I'll have to read it): "The Mark Zuckerberg Manifesto Is a Blueprint for Destroying Journalism." So, "blueprint" has come to mean almost any set and reproducible plan. It describes how a thing to be made is to be made. It's a model for putting something together: a building, a project, a task, a battle.

Some of us are familiar with another kind of drawing used for making plans. It's called an "organizational chart," or "org chart" for short. Org charts are those diagrams that sketch out relationships between people or groups of people in a company, or a school, or a government, or some such institution of sufficient size that it's helpful to know who relates to whom and how.

Very often, an org chart will have at the very top a box or circle labeled "President" or "CEO" or "Boss" or (if it's small and somewhat informal) "Joe" or "Sally."

And underneath (it's almost always underneath) will come those few or several who are immediately accountable to the person at the top, and then under those will be listed the ones who report to them, and so on down.

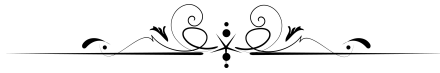
Sometimes the names will be of departments rather than the titles or jobs of people. But, as Mitt Romney might say, departments *are* people.

Blueprints and org charts are such useful things. So much building and planning and doing and relating happen with them. They help us understand what's next and who's next, where things fit and where we fit in. They show importance and they reveal purpose. They clarify and they answer.

But as Shakespeare's Hamlet said,

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" ...*

or in our blueprints and org charts.



In the verses of scripture I read moments ago, Paul makes some big claims about the community to which the Christians of Corinth belonged. These are big, startling claims about the church. And we would do well to pay attention to these claims, to realize how deep they really are, and to respond accordingly.

Because they are very much about the kinds of things that would typically have us reaching for blueprints and org charts.

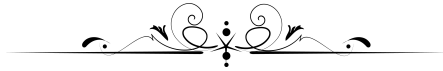
Paul begins by picturing the church as a building, a very special building. Oh, more than special. It is holy. This is not some modest little shack. It's a *temple*, the dwelling place of God's Spirit. That's right, the dear Christians to whom Paul writes his letter, a letter that sometimes praises and sometimes scolds, they are the temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

On this temple, this building, different craftsmen have worked and will work, as if they are subcontractors appointed to different aspects of the construction process. Paul had a piece of that work, as did others. But just a piece. And Paul's piece for the church in Corinth was to lay the foundation. After him came others, to build on that foundation.

And what is that foundation? What is the foundation of the church? Well, actually, it's not a *what*; it's a *who*. The foundation is Jesus Christ. It is Christ himself, and Christ alone, who is the foundation of the church. There is no other foundation that can be laid than him. Paul laid the foundation. But he was just doing what was given him to do. As a servant-builder, he laid the foundation that he was given to lay. And, in ways that stretch the metaphor, the one who gave him the foundation on which to build was the foundation himself, Jesus Christ.

Built on that foundation, Paul's dear ones, even all Christians, are so special, so elevated in importance, that all the typical hierarchies are blown away. Because they belong to Jesus, they do not belong to Paul or to other apostles and church leaders. Instead Paul belongs to them, to the Christians in Corinth, to those whom he taught, whom he had led, whom he had nurtured in the faith, those who often spoke of him as if they belonged to him ... *no*, Paul tells them, he belongs to them.

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.



Now, there's so much about this that is surprising, an "oh, really?" kind of surprising. These are not the blueprint or org chart one might typically expect: the church as God's holy temple, which has Jesus Christ as its one and only foundation, so that the leaders are servants belonging to those whom they lead in service ... this is really quite different.

First there's that temple thing. I mean, really? Just look around. Look at the people on either side of you. Do all of us together look to you like the dwelling of the Holy Spirit?

Okay, I'll be nice. But still, the church is a social organization, a human institution, a voluntary society, with all the good and bad that go with that.

But it is not only these things. We are not only these things.

Somehow, it, and we, are also the body of Christ. It, and we, are the temple of the Lord God. Together, ineffably, miraculously, we are also the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, a holy building built upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

How can it, and we, be both?

This is hard. And by "hard" I don't mean merely that it is a difficult puzzle for our brains to puzzle over (although it is that, too). I mean it's hard in that the tension, the gap, between what scripture tells us the church should be and our lived experience of the church is deeply, broadly, painfully wide. I mean it's hard because the church is more than it appears to be, even as it is also so often far less than it should be.

It has been God's instrument for transformation and reconciliation. But it has also been corrupted to serve as a pitifully human instrument of abuse and alienation.

It has been Christ's new community in which there is neither male and female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free (cf. Galatians 3:28), in which the divisions of society are mended and the hierarchies of the world are toppled. But it has also been where those divisions and hierarchies are most fiercely defended and perpetuated.

In church, people have been blessed, and they have been loved. And in church people have been hurt, they've been hated. Churches have been agents of charity, and they have been incubators of prejudice.

So that's one thing that's challenging about what Paul says. And then there's that whole "Jesus as foundation" stuff, which can seem to be not so smart. As in, "foolish."

I mean, wouldn't it be smarter to give the church some solid support with good programs and visionary leaders and inspiring mission statements? Gee, one would think Jesus would appreciate the help.

"No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid ... Jesus Christ.... [T]he wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.... So let no one boast about human leaders."

The foundation of the church, *our* foundation, is Jesus Christ. He is the one

who grounds the church,
who gives it its stability and purpose and order,
who makes it solid and secure.

Other foundations will not do. To try and change the foundation would be to change the church, absolutely, making it into something other than the church. To change the foundation would destroy the church. And God will not let off lightly those who seek the destruction of the church.

Hear me now: any church congregation that sets out to change its foundation, to substitute something else in place of Jesus as its grounding reason and abiding purpose, has set out on a path toward its own destruction.

For the church, both the blueprint and the org chart are different from those we find elsewhere. They are unique. Praise Jesus, they are different and unique.

And yet, Christians have again and again tried to build according to other blueprints and relate to each other by means of other org charts.

I think I know why.

We crave certainty. We are hungry for direction. And yet we want to determine these on our own. So we craft our own purposes, and then make idols of them. We yearn for clear chains of command, so we build hierarchies that empower a few and disempower the many, and to those few we give them our praise and even our worship.

We seek to lay other foundations and then build up the church on them:

leaders and programs,
friendliness and helpfulness,
political activity (whether that be on the right or the left),
local traditions and cherished history,
ethnicity,
denominationalism.

For many people, the church simply *is* the services and programs provided to them over the years. So valued are those activities that some think these truly *are* the church, so that without these the church ceases to be.

The church then becomes a business and the members of the church its customers, who seek (and even demand) services. And when the church does not or is no longer able to provide the same level of service it did 25 or 30 or 50 years ago, then the reaction is often disappointment, sorrow, anger, demands for changes in program or leadership, proposals that we go back or go forward —

yet perhaps not enough reflection on one's own commitment,
not enough repentance,
nowhere near enough prayer,
too few questions about whether one's own participation in Christ's work
is anywhere near adequate,
too little confession of the centrality of the Lord Jesus in the life of the
church and in the lives of its members.

In answer to all these tendencies of ours, the Spirit beckons us to give up that urge to place the church on a solid footing of our own choosing.

But surely, there must be a place for all those things:

for programs,
for mission statements,
for good activities,
for effective leadership and well-planned service.

To be sure, we must resist that ever-present temptation to make any of these substitutes for Jesus, setting them in the foundational place that belongs only to him.

But when they are really and truly a response to Jesus, a loving answer to him who first loved us and gave himself for us, when they grow organically from the good and holy foundation, then they can be a help, even a gift, in the ongoing up-building of the church.

Yet they are not, nor ever can be, the foundation, the purpose, the meaning, the goal of the church, the point of why we gather and of what we do.

They are neither the blueprints nor the org charts of the church.

*To Jesus Christ, who loves us
and freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion
forever and ever.
Amen.¹*

¹From Revelation 1:5-6, NRSV